DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 298 489 CS 211 454

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TITLE University Presses As "Gatekeepers of Ideas" within Society.
PUB DATE Jul 88
NOTE 36p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (71st, Portland, OR, July 2-5, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Authors; *Books; Editors; *Faculty Publishing; Higher Education; Media Research; *Publishing Industry; Social Influences; *Writing for Publication
IDENTIFIERS Book Sales; Editorial Boards; Editorial Policy; Editor Role; *Gatekeeper Role; *University Presses

ABSTRACT

University presses serve a prominent gatekeeping role in scholarly publishing because they, unlike commercial presses, can select books which transmit knowledge without being wholly captive to the marketplace. To analyze the cyclical flow that continually advances intellectual life, this selection procedure was examined with a study of the acquisition processes at university presses. The study consisted of three components: a year-long, on-site observation of a mid-sized university press; personal interviews with directors and editors representing 30 university presses; and a survey of 52 United States-based members and affiliates of the Association of American University Presses. Findings showed that (1) 9 out of 10 unsolicited manuscripts were returned to the authors without ever entering the publishing stream; (2) only about 2% of author-initiated queries eventually resulted in a published book; (3) authors whose manuscripts were actively solicited had a 22% chance of the manuscript being published; (4) if a manuscript makes it to the editorial committee stage, its chances for publication are exceptionally good; and (5) responding university presses placed some importance on the promise of financial gain in the decision to publish, but other factors--such as list building and the author's background--play larger roles. The conclusion is that as a leading vehicle for intellectual intercourse, university presses actively shape the cultural agenda through list-building and aggressive acquisition methods. (Eight tables of data are included, and 20 references are appended.) (MS)

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ED298489

# UNIVERSITY PRESSES AS "GATEKEEPERS OF IDEAS" WITHIN SOCIETY

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Presented to the Mass Communication and Society Division
Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications
Portland, Oregon
July 2, 1988

CS 211 454

## UNIVERSITY PRESSES AS "GATEKEEPERS OF IDEAS" WITHIN SOCIETY

Publishers stand at the crossroads of intellectual discovery and the public consumption of that discovery. Rather than being neutral intermediaries in the process, publishers help determine what is 'in' and what is 'out' in the marketplace of ideas. By choosing to publish some works and by choosing not to publish others, they play a vital role in the transmission of knowledge within a society. In sociologist Lewis Coser's phrase (1976:17), publishers are "gatekeepers of ideas."

In this age of decentralized media, publishing no longer occupies the near-monopolistic gatekeeping position it once enjoyed. Yet in the realm of scholarly knowledge, publication remains the primary vehicle for intellectual discourse in literate societies. Publishers bring together the producers of ideas with their consuming publics. Fortunately for producers and consumers alike, scholarly publishing has no single gatekeeper. Scholarly decision-making resides in a great number of autonomous firms, all with their own interests and their own perceptions of what is worthy of publication.

University presses serve a prominent gatekeeping role in scholarly publishing because they, unlike commercial presses, can select knowledge for distribution without being wholly captive to the marketplace. The university press, after all, resides in two worlds -- that of the scholarly community and that of the publishing industry.

The typical university press stands outside the regular university machinery. It is a non-profit enterprise organizationally attached to the administration rather than to a particular school or faculty. Most presses are subsidized through use of university buildings and services. Because a press is one flesh with the parent university, its purpose is to advance intellectual life rather than to make a profit on its books.

Yet a book is both an idea and a commodity. Its intent is to be intellectually stimulating, but first it must be bought. Within any publishing house, some employees will be more concerned with books as ideas while others will be more concerned with books as commodities. The balance of power between the two is what makes university presses distinctive (Miles 1984 ). In commercial publishing, those who are more concerned with books as ideas report to those who are more concerned with books as commodities. In university presses, ostensibly, the balance of power is reversed.

With this distinctive thrust, university presses exert an influence on American publishing significantly out of proportion to their size. University press income accounts for slightly more than one percent of publishing's annual sales, yet university presses publish about 10 percent of the 40,000 new titles in the United States each year (Grannis 1984). Moreover, if National Book Awards are taken as a measure of cultural impact, it is noteworthy that more than 20 percent of the awards and prizes made since 1950 have gone to books published by university presses (Meyer and Phillabaum 1980).

University presses serve as important catalysts for scholarly inquiry. Their role in the enrichment of intellectual life occurs, in theory, through this process: Scholars do research. Their work is evaluated by the press' editors. Many manuscripts are returned, while those considered most promising are sent to the authors' peers for anonymous review. More manuscripts are rejected, while others are returned to authors for revision. In the end, an editorial committee of scholars selected from the parent institution's faculty and administration decide whether to publish the work. Ideally, only the best works are published. These are collected and sorted in libraries, where other scholars can use them for their own research. If only the best works indeed are published, then this process becomes a cyclical flow that continually advances intellectual life.

## Research Methodology

This study of the acquisition processes at university presses consisted of three components: a year-long, on-site observation of a mid-sized university press, personal interviews with directors and editors representing 30 university presses, and then a survey of the 74 U.S.-based members and affiliates of the Association of American University Presses. Fifty-two of the eligible presses responded for a return rate of 70.2 percent.

The survey instrument relied in part on quantitatively provable figures, such as the number of new titles published, and in part on quantitatively unprovable estimates, such as the number of author

queries received in a given year. Few presses maintain such records because these figures are not of operational significance to them. Yet rather than dismiss such information as unobtainable, the survey asked for estimates that, collectively, could help paint a portrait of the acquisition process.

## Historical Overview

A strong association has existed through the years between universities and publishing. The invention of movable type by Johannes Gutenberg in Germany, circa 1450, started a literary revolution that now has spanned more than half a millennium. By giving permanence to ideas and by recording achievements, books answered a deep human need. Scholars debate whether the first university press was established at Oxford in 1478 -- one year after William Caxton printed the first book in the English language -- or at Cambridge in 1521. Whenever the start, these early presses basically were printing houses attached to the parent universities, with London booksellers serving as the publishing agents (Tebbel 1975:535).

The first university press in the United States appeared at Cornell University in 1869. But the school's trustees were not convinced the university needed a press, and only two pamphlets were issued before the press was declared defunct in 1883. Cornell did not re-establish its press for almost 50 years. In 1878, the Johns Hopkins University started what has become the oldest continuously operating university press in the United States. Daniel Coit Gilman, the first

president of the Johns Hopkins University, is considered the father of American university publishing. He maintained that universities not only have an obligation to teach and to research, but also to publish. Gilman's aphorism of 1878 has become a motto for university presses:

> It is one of the noblest duties of a university to advance knowledge, and to diffuse it not merely among those who can attend the daily lectures -- but far and wide.

In the United States, as in Europe, the publication of graduate school theses was compulsory in the 19th century. Graduate students paid for the printing of their doctoral theses, and the universities assumed responsibility for distributing the scholarly work. But when the output of increasing numbers of graduate students was combined with that of faculties, it became clear that regular publishing channels would be inadequate. Thus arose the need for the university press. Robert Frederick Lane, in a doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago in 1939, wrote:

> There can be little doubt that many university presses, especially those with manufacturing plants, were often established in order to do the institutional printing. Allied with this was the argument that students in Journalism required a printing laboratory. The theory that a university press was a means for publishing the product of research, that it would enhance the reputations of scholars and institutions, developed relatively late in American university press history.

The university press movement grew slowly and erratically in the late 1800s and early 1900s, then began to expand in the 1920s and 1930s. Early in the 20th century, university presses in the United States primarily were confined to privately endowed universities.

Even some of these came to question the presence of a press. In 1943, President James B. Conant of Harvard University wanted to dispose of the Harvard Press, viewing it as a business enterprise with no academic virtue. In a spirited defense of the press, Harvard professor Ralph Barton Perry outlined its merits (reprint 1986:111):

> The university ... holds in its hands and can apply a seal of scholarly honesty and accuracy. Its name is a certificate of quality. In their capacity as scholars, its members write not what they think they can sell, but the conclusions they have reached as a result of thorough and expert inquiry. They are not obliged to cater to appetites and purchasing power. The public, therefore, has confidence in the university's disinterestedness and good faith.

The continued existence of the Harvard Press was made secure the following year.

University presses, however, remained an insignificant part of American publishing until after World War II. Chester Kerr, former director of the Yale University Press, reported (1969:15) that university presses until this time were run by amateurs such as printers, or scholars near retirement, or professors with no future in their chosen fields of scholarship. With few exceptions, the publishing lists consisted primarily of doctoral dissertations, some regional titles and other publications that likely would have been called "vanity books" had their authors not been connected with respectable institutions. Many university presses served more as printers than as publishers, often wielding little editorial authority. In 1948, in his first year as director of the Johns Hopkins University Press, Harold Ingle was surprised upon being presented a

book bearing the press' imprint by a professor who had taken his manuscript directly to the printer (Shugg 1978:7). That doesn't happen anymore. One measure of the strength of university presses today -- be they large or small, public or private -- is their undisputed ability to exercise editorial control.

In the decades following World War II, university presses experienced unprecedented growth. In the 1950s and 1960s, they expanded with the help of foundation funding and in conjunction with the government-supported library prosperity of those years. Then came the inflation years of the 1970s. Book sales declined. Book prices went up. Library budgets were cut. Universities experiencing budgetary problems began expecting their presses to break even financially. A few university presses even went out of business. Publication was seen as increasingly difficult for young scholars. This led to a widespread belief that something was seriously wrong with the system of scholarly communication in the United States. The phrase "crisis in scholarly publishing" was used often during the decade, leading to the creation of a National Enquiry into Scholarly Communication. This panel of publishers, librarians and scholars issued its report in book form in 1979 on complex topics ranging from government policies to the needs of research libraries. But scholarly publishing proved resilient. The word "crisis" seldom is applied to scholarly publishing anymore. University presses are expanding in the latter 20th century, with a renewed sense of their gatekeeping function in society.

## Theoretical Underpinnings

The term "gatekeeper" was brought into the language in 1947 by sociologist Kurt Lewin. The term was broadened to the communications field in 1950 by David M. White. Since that time, the concept has been elevated to communications theory, relegated to a subservient role of news-gathering, and brought back again to the concepts of Lewin.

Lewin contended that social forces flow along channels and pass through gates that are governed by impartial rules or by gatekeepers who make the necessary decisions on what passes through. The power group or individual makes the decision for 'in' or 'out.' Noting that food comes to the family table through certain channels with 'gates' that allow the progress of some yet stop the progress of others, Lewin theorized (1947:145):

> The passing or not passing of the unit through the whole channel depends to a high degree upon what happens in the gate region. This holds not only for food channels but also for the traveling of a news item through certain communications channels in a group.

Bruce Westley and Malcolm MacLean (1957) brought the gatekeeper into their conceptual model for communications research. The theorists called the gatekeeper the agent for the audience rather than the originator of information or the communicator for the sender.

In fact, all social organizations depend to some extent on the use and control of information. Gatekeeping is a form of information, or knowledge, control. In selecting which books to publish and which to reject, book publishers engage in a form of knowledge control. Gordon Neavill considered this to be an essential function of

scholarly publishing, writing (1975:27):

> It is crucial to the dissemination of knowledge that all manuscripts submitted to publishers not be accepted. If all manuscripts were assured of publication, the channels of dissemination would be glutted with works possessing neither intrinsic merit nor commercial potential, and works for which an audience did exist would sink beneath the weight....
>
> Of course, it is also crucial to the dissemination of knowledge that works which merit publication on the basis of their content not be rejected.

The manuscript selection process, then, ideally is based on the quality of the work. August Fruge, director emeritus of the University of California Press, has praised the standards existing in university publishing (1978:297):

> The bars are reasonably high, the channels clear; the mediocre do not swamp the excellent. If this be elitism, that mortal sin of an egalitarian world, it is the elitism of excellence. Without it we might as well count pages.
>
> Thus, all scholarly publishers together have performed a social and cultural role that is not always apprehended or appreciated.... From the great mass of written manuscripts, and those proposed to be written, they have chosen a fraction -- the best, the most useful -- for making public.

## The Acquisition Process

The acquisition of manuscripts is the heart of publishing. The other publishing functions -- copy-editing, book design, marketing and distribution -- can be delegated on a contractual basis. But the one function that cannot be delegated is the decision of **what** to publish.

That decision begins with each press' designation of its list, representing the areas in which it chooses to publish programmatically.

This is called list-building. Just as scholars now specialize, so do university presses. Today, few university presses invite manuscript submissions in all disciplines. Instead, they focus on selected disciplines as an aid to both the editorial and marketing functions. Because of the increasing fractionalization of knowledge, no editor can keep abreast of the latest developments in all disciplines. By concentrating on limited areas of publishing, editors can become more knowledgeable of developments in their designated interest areas. This, in turn, allows them to be more effective at establishing "networks" of scholars in these areas, and the press can establish a presence for itself in the discipline. List-building also has marketing advantages. Promotion and marketing managers agree it is more productive and cost-efficient to promote a list that is focused in relatively few areas than one that is randomly assembled and consists largely of orphans -- books published without related titles that can be marketed to the same audience.

University presses primarily publish in the humanities and social sciences, with the natural sciences a publishing focus of fewer than a third of the presses. The most common areas of list-building are history and literary studies, with manuscripts in those fields pursued by almost all university presses. Conversely, only about half of the presses specify philosophy and political science as publishing areas. About one in four presses have lists in music or religion, one in seven emphasize architecture, and fewer than one in 10 specify agriculture as a specialty.

The creation of a list by each university press is the product of four criteria: the strengths of the parent university, the publishing heritage of the press, the sales potential of various fields of inquiry, and the scholarly interests of the editors themselves.

The first consideration in the formation of a list is the press' desire to reflect strengths of its parent institution. A university press, however, cannot be a full-length mirror. Scholarly research in any university is too diffuse. But, naturally, a press has an obligation to reflect at least some of the particular strengths and emerging interests of the parent institution. The MIT Press, for instance, is heavily weighted toward engineering, technology and neuroscience. The University of Hawaii Press, logically, specializes in Asian and Pacific studies.

The publishing heritage of a press also influences list-building. For instance, the University of North Carolina Press developed a reputation through the years for Southern studies. In the 1930s, the press began published critical studies concerning education, tenant farming, child labor and race relations in the South. This aggressive publishing program in controversial areas brought financial support from Northern foundations and praise from eminent scholars. At one point, noted historians Henry Steele Commager and Allan Nevins even declared North Carolina to be the best of the nation's university presses (Williams 1981:13). Today, the North Carolina press continues to emphasize Southern studies. Similarly, the University of Minnesota Press is best known for its books in the health sciences.

The third consideration in the formation of a list is the sales potential of particular fields of inquiry. Libraries serve as the leading institutional buyers of university press books. But as library sales decline, publishers recognize the need to appeal to individual book buyers. Editors routinely stated that American historians buy books, and so do bird lovers; poets don't, and neither do literary critics or theorists. This doesn't mean that university presses flock to bird-book writers and shun the proposals of literature professors. But in time, editors said, sales records cannot help but influence the development of a publisher's list. For example, the University Press of Kansas still publishes literary criticism, but less of it than once published. The press also publishes fewer books in European history and Slavic studies -- two other traditional low-sales categories. In their place, the Kansas press is publishing more political science, political philosophy, and 20th-century social American history -- all scholarly fields with more active buying audiences.

Finally, the interests of the editors themselves influence the formation of a list. Many university press directors and acquisition editors -- the positions most likely to influence the development of a press' list -- have English literature backgrounds. In fact, the survey showed that a third of the press directors and more than 40 percent of the senior acquisition editors specialized in that field during their student days. The study of history was a distant second.

Editors once sat in their offices and waited each day for the mail to bring them manuscripts worth publishing. Today, a few manuscripts

still come over the transom. But far more are actively acquired by editors scouring university campuses, going to scholarly conventions, browsing through academic journals, and writing letters to scholars.

Manuscripts, then, come to the attention of editors in a variety of ways. But they all share a common characteristic -- **someone** has to make the initial overture that leads to publication. The various methods of manuscript acquisition can be placed in four categories:

* **Unsolicited manuscript.** Without an invitation to do so, the author sends a completed manuscript to a press.

* **Author-initiated query.** The author establishes first contact with the press by writing a query letter or by approaching or calling an editor.

* **Editor-initiated query.** The editor establishes first contact with the author by letter, phone or in person.

* **Prior association.** The author and the editor already have established an association, perhaps through a prior book. Whatever the association, neither had to make a blind inquiry of the other.

**Table 1** shows that responding presses collectively estimated that more than one in three new titles published in the survey year of 1985 came about via editor-initiated queries. One in four resulted in a prior association, and another quarter came about via author-initiated queries. Fewer than one in 10 originated as unsolicited manuscripts. In the "other" category, university presses listed such acquisition mechanisms as literary agents, lecture series, foreign projects, and poetry and short fiction contests where outside judges make selections.

**TABLE 1**

**Estimate of How Published Manuscripts Were Initiated**

| Method of Acquisition | No. of Published Manuscripts |
|---|---|
| Unsolicited manuscript | 183 (8%) |
| Author-initiated query | 608 (26%) |
| Editor-initiated query | 845 (37%) |
| Prior association | 568 (25%) |
| Other | 104 (4%) |
| | 2,308 |

NOTE: The 52 responding university presses reported publishing 2,346 new titles during 1985. Two presses did not specify how these publishable manuscripts came to their press, hence the 2,308 total.

Senders of unsolicited manuscripts should not be too encouraged by the fact that some over-the-transom submissions are published. Table 2 shows that responding presses collectively estimated that more than nine of 10 unsolicited manuscripts were returned to the authors without ever entering the publishing stream. An estimated 9 percent of unsolicited submissions were accepted to the extent that an outside referee was asked to judge the manuscript's merits and, once an unsolicited manuscript entered the publishing stream, the chances for eventual publication improved to about 21 percent. Overall, however, responding presses collectively estimated that about 2 percent of the unsolicited manuscripts they received eventually were published.

**TABLE 2**

**Estimate of Success Rate for Unsolicited Manuscript Submissions**

| Manuscript Status | No. of Manuscripts | Success Rates |
|---|---|---|
| Unsolicited manuscripts received . . . . . | 9,610 | |
| | | 9% |
| Number sent for outside review . . . . . | 860 | 2% |
| | | 21% |
| Unsolicited manuscripts published . . . . . | 183 | |

NOTE: Two university presses did not provide figures for unsolicited manuscripts received. Concerning the number sent for outside review, one said "very few" and the other "less than 10." These two responses were omitted from the table.

Twenty-one presses -- 40 percent of the responses -- said they did not publish a single unsolicited manuscript during the survey year.

One of the striking differences in scholarly communication is the contrast between the selection processes in the world of academic journals and the world of scholarly books. Manuscripts generally come to journal editors unsolicited. This is not the norm in book publishing. Finding a publisher is more akin to finding an employer. Morris Philipson, director of the University of Chicago Press, made the following analogy (1977:292):

> No publisher can bring out every single manuscript that is submitted to him, any more than a publisher can hire every person who applies for a job. You might want to work at the Oxford University Press, but it makes more sense to send a letter of inquiry describing your qualifications and asking whether there is a position available, rather than to get on a plane and fly to England to present yourself physically and ask to be hired. It is a kindness to both parties.

Unsolicited manuscripts may be unwanted, but query letters from authors are an accepted part of scholarly publishing. Publishers are in business to publish, and a writer cannot insult a publishing house by offering it a manuscript appropriate to its list.

Yet for every published manuscript initiated by an author query, another 50 are not published. **Table 3** shows that responding university presses collectively estimated that roughly one in 10 queries results in an editor's request to see the complete manuscript. Of those reaching this intermediate stage, an estimated 18 percent actually proceed through editor review, outside peer evaluation and editorial committee approval. Overall, then, responding presses collectively estimated that about 2 percent of author-initiated queries eventually resulted in a published book -- identical to the percentage of unsolicited manuscripts eventually published.

**TABLE 3**

**Estimate of Success Rate for Author-Initiated Queries**

| Manuscript Status | No. of Manuscripts | Success Rates |
|---|---|---|
| Author queries received . . . . . | 32,450 | |
| | | 10% |
| Manuscripts requested on basis of author queries . . . . . | 3,360 | |
| | | 18% |
| Manuscripts published originating from queries . . . . . | 608 | |
| | | 2% |

NOTE: Three responding presses did not give estimates of author queries received, so their responses on manuscripts requested and eventually published on the basis of author queries were omitted.

"Look what your chances are," University of Arkansas Press director Miller Williams said, turning to a biblical analogy. "It's true: Many are called but few are chosen. Many knock on the door but few are let in."

A press' response to a query often is made by one person -- the acquisitions editor responsible for the subject area. Given the opportunity for an open-ended answer in the survey, half of the responding presses said one editor makes the decision on the typical query. Another quarter answered "one or two" editors, with several respondents writing that one editor typically makes the decision and a second one is consulted if there is uncertainty.

Increasingly, university presses have become active seekers rather than passive receivers of manuscripts. **Table** 4 shows responding presses collectively estimated that authors whose manuscripts were actively solicited had a 22 percent chance of the manuscript being published. The greater the initiating role of the editor, then, the greater appear the chances of publication.

**TABLE 4**

**Estimate of Success Rate for Editor-Initiated Acquisitions**

| Manuscript Status | No. of Manuscripts | Success Rate |
|---|---|---|
| Manuscripts actively acquired by editors . . . . . | 3,880 | |
| Acquired manuscripts eventually published . . . . | 845 | 22% |

It is to a potential author's advantage, then, to come to the attention of an editor. That can be accomplished in a number of ways. A junior scholar may have a senior mentor serving as a referrant. Or the prospective author may get a paper accepted at a prestigious scholarly convention. Acquisition editors routinely prepare for these conventions by skimming the program for paper presentations suitable for book-length treatment, then writing letters to those participants inviting them to come by the press' exhibit booth for a visit. By being on the program, then, an author may enjoy having an editor make that initial contact. The author becomes the pursued rather than the pursuer. Although no quantitative evidence exists, editors believe prospective authors have a better chance of being published when the initial contact is a face-to-face encounter rather than a faceless query. "There's a distinct advantage to a one-on-one conference," one editor said. "If I've seen and talked with you about your manuscript, that can create a tighter joining of our relationship. It's much better than a query letter. We can sit and talk about your work at length."

Convention-going has become an increasingly vital acquisitions mechanism, with presses sending editors to a dozen or more conventions a year. The sale of a book occasionally takes place at professional meetings. But the sales income realized at a convention rarely pays the cost of exhibiting. "It's not sales but manuscripts we're after," said Malcolm MacDonald, director of the University of Alabama Press. "It's to show the flag, to have a presence. You can't quantify that.

It's not like you get a shipment of lawnmowers, you put an ad out and the next day you sell 10 lawnmowers. It's not that easy. It's impossible to quantify the results of any academic meeting. It's a crazy business. I'm here primarily because the other presses are here."

Since books themselves rarely compete, the only real competition in scholarly publishing is the quest for manuscripts. This competition is not an outward marketplace rivalry as much as it is "quiet diplomatic seeking" -- a term used by Edward King, director of the University of Missouri Press.

The survey revealed that two of three university presses view the competition for manuscripts as increasing, with the remaining third concluding that competition is about the same now as a decade ago. None said competition was decreasing. Yet competition depends on a press' list-building efforts. Not all presses compete in all areas. For instance, the Stanford University Press, which publishes in law, need not worry about competition from the Indiana University Press, which does not solicit manuscripts in law. But Indiana and Stanford both offer lists in women's studies, so they may vigorously compete for the same authors in that field. "Scholarly publishing has become a lot more competitive," one of the competing editors said. "You're slitting your own throat if you ignore that fact."

The university press once existed almost exclusively as a service agency, publishing the work of the home faculty and little else. This role has undergone a dramatic transformation in recent years. All university presses, of course, still publish their own faculty works,

but that role no longer predominates. In a 1948 study, Yale University Press director Chester Kerr found that 60 percent of the manuscripts published by the 35 university presses then in existence were written by scholars at the presses' parent institutions. In a 1968 followup, Kerr (1969:18) found that the percentage had dropped to 40 percent. Table 5 shows that percentage evidently has dropped even more in the past two decades. Only six of the 51 responding presses said the works of scholars at the parent institution constituted 40 percent or more of their front lists. More than half of the presses said home authors wrote fewer than 20 percent of their new titles. What this means is that the acquisition process is not a closed system, and editors now play an increasingly important role in the initial selection process.

**TABLE 5**

**Estimate of Percentage of Books Written by Home Faculty**

| Percentage Ranges | No. of Presses (N=51) |
|---|---|
| Fewer than 10 percent | 9 |
| 10 to 19 percent | 20 |
| 20 to 29 percent | 10 |
| 30 to 39 percent | 6 |
| 40 to 49 percent | 2 |
| 50 percent or above | 4 |

NOTE: These ranges were not specified in the questionnaire. The open-ended responses have been grouped for ease of comparison.

Yet no matter how well a manuscript may fit the list or how enthusiastic an editor may be, each manuscript must meet the test of peer review before it can be published. This is an evaluation of a manuscript by the author's peers -- referees outside the publishing house.

Since scholars serve as the primary audience for university press books, it is only natural to have scholars evaluate a manuscript's contribution to a discipline before the publishing decision is made. Leading scholars in a discipline are considered natural gatekeeping advisees for that discipline.

"Many people feel that readers' reports are obstacles," said Barbara Hanrahan, acquisitions editor at the University of Wisconsin Press. "It's hard emotionally for an author to realize that when he finishes a manuscript and sends it to a publisher, that's not the end but the beginning. It's the beginning from the standpoint of the publisher." Hanrahan said the mark of a good editor is how well the editor makes the review process work. "The review process really is crucial," she said. "The best books in the world have been turned down because the editor made a mistake and got the wrong reader."

To minimize that possibility, the norm in university publishing is to obtain two outside readings. With at least two peer reviews as guidance, editors eliminate the risk that a good manuscript will be rejected or a bad one published on the basis of a single misguided critique. Roughly nine in 10 responding university presses reported that they typically send a manuscript to two readers for evaluation.

Presses seldom seek more than two outside reviews if both are positive. When a press seeks a third, fourth or fifth review, it indicates that the editor is an advocate of the manuscript but one of the first two reviews was less than positive. A New York editor said his press had used as many as five readers on a manuscript, but added that a press probably should decline to publish the manuscript if it takes that many readings to arrive at a publishing decision.

Editors find reviewers much as they find authors. They chat with scholars at conventions, visit campuses and draw on friendships. Editors keep a file of potential reviewers by discipline. Certain informal rules apply in the selection of outside readers. They cannot be in the same department as the author, or even on the same campus. Editors try to avoid readers who might be influenced by irrelevant considerations such as friendship, animosity, theorical chasms, or even second-generation disputes in which scholars cleave to the grudges of their mentors.

Some university presses simply ask readers to examine the manuscript and comment in narrative form on its suitability for publication; other presses provide a questionnaire for reviewers to fill out. At this stage of the scholarly publishing process, many manuscripts that looked promising to editors -- and that might even have been solicited by the editors -- lose their appeal. The number of manuscripts that receive unqualified endorsement in the outside review process is a distinct minority. **Table 6** shows a clear tilt toward a high manuscript rejection rate by outside peer reviewers.

**TABLE 6**

**Estimate of Manuscript Evaluation Results by Outside Readers**

| | By No. of Presses (N=52) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Under 20% | 20-29% | 30-39% | 40-49% | 50% up |
| Recommend publishing with little or no revision | 14 | 18 | 9 | 2 | 9 |
| Recommend substantial revision before publishing | 7 | 11 | 11 | 8 | 15 |
| Recommend not publishing | 3 | 12 | 15 | 5 | 17 |

NOTE: These ranges were not specified in the questionnaire. The open-ended responses have been grouped for ease of comparison.

Specifically, 14 presses said their outside readers collectively recommended publication, with little or no revision necessary, for fewer than 20 percent of the manuscripts evaluated. Another 18 presses said their outside readers recommended outright publication for between 20 and 29 percent of the manuscripts considered. Yet nine presses estimated that their outside readers recommended outright publication at least half of the time. Conversely, as shown on the bottom row, 17 presses estimated that outside readers recommended **against** publication at least half of the time, while only three presses said that happened under 20 percent of the time.

Although a trend appears clear -- one that should prevent too much optimism by authors reaching this stage in the decision-making process -- the lack of standardization suggests that each press has its own philosophy about the outside peer review process. Some presses rather freely send manuscripts out for review. Others are considerably more selective, not sending a manuscript out for review unless the editors are fairly assured it will get positive recommendations. Ironically, the higher percentages of favorable recommendations often were reported by the more-prestigious presses that publish a large number of books by senior scholars whose works are likely to receive favorable recommendations. Many of the lower percentages of favorable recommendations were reported by smaller, less-prestigious presses that typically deal with junior scholars. In search for the best, these presses may send out a lot of less-than-best to outside readers.

Not only do acquisition editors determine which manuscripts enter the publishing "gate" and then select the most appropriate readers, but throughout the process they weigh the positives of a manuscript against the negatives, deciding whether the manuscript should go to the final stage of the decision-making process.

That final stage is a committee of academicians commonly called an editorial board. The ultimate decision to publish rests with this committee comprised primarily of university faculty members and typically ranging in size from seven to 15. The editorial board plays no role in the publishing process until the very end and does not consider any work that has not already passed through the editors.

**TABLE 7**

**Estimate of Rejection Rate by Editorial Committees**

| Rejection Rates | No. of Presses (N=51) |
|---|---|
| No manuscripts rejected | 20 |
| 1 to 5 percent rejected | 21 |
| 6 to 10 percent rejected | 7 |
| More than 10 percent rejected | 3 |

NOTE: These ranges were not specified in the questionnaire. The open-ended responses have been grouped for ease of comparison.

Table 7 shows that if a manuscript makes it to the editorial committee stage, its chances for publication are exceptionally good. Twenty responding university presses said their editorial committees rejected no manuscripts in the survey year. Another 21 presses estimated the rejection rate to be 5 percent or below, meaning at least 19 of every 20 manuscripts under consideration eventually were awarded The Imprint.

Several acquisitions editors said privately that sometimes they will submit a manuscript that received lukewarm outside reviews to the board for consideration, just so the author will be angry at a faceless board rather than at the editor for not pursuing publication to the very end. Some editors said their committees like to be able to say 'no' to something now and then, so one or two borderline projects become sacrificial lambs at each meeting.

The three-step process, then, is the editor's initial decision, favorable peer review and then editorial board approval. Throughout this process, a university press not only seeks scholarship meriting publication, but it also must finance it. A university press may be a 'Non-Profit Org.' in the eyes of the U.S. Postal Service, but it cannot ignore economic realities.

After all, university presses publish the most specialized of books and sell them to the narrowest of audiences. This somehow must be done without financial calamity. So scholarly presses must sell the books they publish. Some may consider this attention to the business function to be a form of commercial publishing mentality. But show a commercial publisher the last 10 books published by any university press, and ask how many would have been published commercially, and the difference becomes obvious. A commercial publisher always can say 'no' to a manuscript on the basis that it is not likely to be profitable. Not so for university presses. The aim of non-profit university presses is to advance knowledge, not to make a profit. If a manuscript is not accepted after an editor already has invited it in for consideration, the editor must convey a conclusion -- no matter how politely it is done -- that the book was unacceptable on grounds other than commercial.

**Table 8** shows that responding university presses placed some importance on the promise of financial gain in the decision to publish. But they said other factors -- such as list-building and the author's background -- play larger roles.

**TABLE 8**

**Importance of Selected Factors in the Decision to Publish**

| Factors | Essential | Very Important | Somewhat Important | Not Important |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Book complements the press' backlist | 13 | 31 | 7 | 0 |
| Author a 'name' in his/her field | 1 | 23 | 21 | 5 |
| Author has Ph.D. or terminal degree | 2 | 21 | 12 | 14 |
| Book promises to make a profit | 4 | 7 | 29 | 9 |
| Book could be used as college text | 1 | 9 | 25 | 15 |
| Author previously published a book | 0 | 10 | 25 | 15 |
| Book promises to be controversial | 0 | 6 | 29 | 15 |
| Author from Ivy League or major school | 1 | 3 | 18 | 28 |

NOTE: Selective responses resulted in N's ranging from 49 to 51 on the items above. Assigning a "4" to essential, a "3" to very important, a "2" to somewhat important, and a "1" to not important, these become the cumulative results placed in rank-order of importance:

Book complements the press' backlist . . . . . 3.12

Author a 'name' in his/her field . . . . . 2.40

Author has Ph.D. or terminal degree . . . . . 2.22

Book promises to make a profit . . . . . 2.12

Book could be used as college text . . . . . 1.92

Author previously published a book . . . . . 1.90

Book promises to be controversial . . . . . 1.82

Author from Ivy League or major school . . . . . 1.54

## Conclusion and Analysis

Scholarly publishing serves not only as a transmitter of ideas but also as an intellectual agent of society. The role of intellectual gatekeeper involves more than simply publishing received knowledge. The gatekeeper also should keep abreast of intellectual currents, define and redefine fields of inquiry, challenge preconceived notions and, in so doing, stimulate the mental life of the culture.

Knowledge, after all, is not static. Neither is the pursuit of knowledge. As scholars shift their research attention from one arena of study to another, intellectual pursuit itself shifts. New fields of inquiry arise while old ones decline. The frontiers of knowledge continually expand. This shift in intellectual pursuit is reflected in what eventually reaches publication.

List-building continually evolves because intellectual pursuit and scholarly publishing operate within a cyclical dynamic. Scholars do pioneering work in a field. Editors take note of that interest and start publishing in the new field. Publication encourages more research; more research means more publishing. The cycle continues until, eventually, the new field is incorporated into existing disciplines, falls dead or becomes an established entity of its own.

As a leading vehicle for intellectual intercourse, university presses actively shape the cultural agenda through list-building and aggressive acquisition methods. By being on the frontiers of scholarship, a press can help direct the cultural agenda rather than merely re-enforce existing values, beliefs and practices.

As a result, people in publishing often see themselves as social change agents. By publishing books that overturn or challenge existing theory, editors can take their press' lists in certain directions that influence the cultural agenda. This is a central concept of their role as a gatekeeper of ideas. Citing the significance of the gatekeeping role in scholarly publishing, Northwestern University professor William Exum wrote (1983:125-126):

> The scholarly press is a guardian of received knowledge as well as the expanding frontiers of knowledge. Thus, decisions about which manuscripts do and do not get published play a major role in what gets defined as knowledge, what is thus preserved or presented to a wider audience, and what is dismissed as trivial or not worthwhile.

The relationship between received and emerging knowledge is a precarious one, especially when emerging ideas may sharply challenge received wisdom. Works that contradict, criticize or reject dominant paradigms and traditions often take shape within a developing arena or school of thought little known or accepted by establishment scholars.

Interestingly, university presses operate within a system that theoretically balances the interests of received knowledge and emerging knowledge. The editors themselves who make that initial in-house evaluation of a manuscript or proposal have a bias toward emerging knowledge. They prefer works that challenge the status quo because these will be the books that have the most potential for influencing intellectual currents. After all, without challenges to the status quo, scholarship would be a stagnant repetition of what already is known. Because of this, the acquisition process encourages

non-traditional ideas. The traditional way of looking at history or economics or mass media becomes the conservative, status quo approach.

Yet the scholarly publishing enterprise also is highly structured toward the status quo. Peer reviewers and editorial committee members tend to be established scholars in a field -- in fact, the very ones who may have built their careers on what is now called the status quo in their disciplines. Particularly in the selection of peer reviewers, editors must remain cognizant of this potential conflict of purpose. But editors get to select the peer reviewers for each manuscript under consideration, and editors look for scholars who would be open-minded to new directions within their discipline as long as the work fulfills the standards of scholarship.

So, editors with their preference toward emerging knowledge and scholars who play an essential role in preserving the quality of The Imprint combine to chart a path that seeks to expand disciplines but within an acceptable scholarly framework.

Within the university structure, the bars are reasonably high to ensure that the books chosen for publication meet certain standards. Nothing reaches print at a university press without meeting some acknowledged standard of scholarship. Ostensibly, the more prestigious the press, the higher the standards. But the problem isn't what is published but what is not. The gatekeeper not only selects what is permitted to enter the marketplace of ideas but, by default, denies the entry of other works into the marketplace of ideas. This crucial determination influences the flow of knowledge within a culture.

To the benefit of scholarship, however, scholarly publishing has a variety of gatekeepers. If one publisher chooses not to place a manuscript in the marketplace of ideas, another publisher can do so. With the existence of dozens of university presses, along with a number of commercial houses that publish serious scholarship, a worthy manuscript -- with perseverance by its author -- should find a home.

The path to university press publication does follow certain norms -- for instance, the three-stage process of in-house evaluation, peer review and editorial committee approval. But decision-making occurs in individualistic terms. No two presses have identical sets of criteria for assessing manuscripts, and no two manuscripts will experience identical consideration.

Unquestionably, how a manuscript comes to the attention of an editor plays a significant role in decision-making. Senior scholars who serve as brokers for the work of junior scholars boost chances for publication simply by persuading an editor to place a manuscript in the decision-making channels. After that, the manuscript is on its own. But for junior scholars, the hardest task simply is getting that initial consideration. Of course, some over-the-transom submissions and blind proposals do eventually reach publication. But any technique that can lead an editor to make the initial overture -- such as presenting a convention paper or writing an article for a leading journal -- will enhance the chances for eventual book publication.

The acquisitions process, frankly, is not egalitarian and never will be. Ann Orlov, a former editor at Harvard University Press, said

it is a delusion that every well-researched and well-written manuscript has an equal chance to be published. Nevertheless, many prefer to view the process as egalitarian anyway. Orlov wrote (1976:240-241):

> I suspect that editors and naive authors hold to the equal-chance myth for the same reason that most of us teach our children that all men in the United States are equal before the law: it is an important ideal with an important social function. What really happens is sometimes fair and sometimes unfair, but without the ideal things would probably be worse.

In book publishing, as in other forms of mass media, the gatekeepers who decide what to let in and what to keep out do not operate in a vacuum. Theirs is but a choice among available options. Authors determine the subjects they write about, and sources frequently determine the extent of the study. Each step in the chain from source to reader offers its own interests, preferences and prejudices.

Then in the end, all that a publisher can do is make the knowledge available. The final decision-maker is the consuming public. The public may choose not to be informed on a specific topic, regardless of the previous gatekeeping decisions on its behalf. A publisher influences the dissemination of knowledge, but cannot direct its consumption. The scholarly publisher can make certain kinds of books available, but cannot make consumers buy books they do not want or make them read books that do not interest them.

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